

# EDUCATIONUPDATE

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## The Two-Minute Relationship Builder

*Sarah McKibben*

What if instead of going head-to-head with your most challenging student, you created an ally in him? During the 2013 ASCD Conference on Educational Leadership, presenter Grace Dearborn shared a strategy for making that happen: the "Two-by-Ten."

Dearborn explained that by spending two minutes a day for 10 consecutive days getting to know a disruptive student, teachers can begin establishing an initial connection. Historically referred to as the "two-minute intervention" by researcher Raymond Wlodkowski, the Two-by-Ten strategy is a way to not only break the ice but also form the foundation for a sustainable relationship—and better classroom behavior.

"It's a motivator, it's a management strategy, and it's a formally researched way [to turn a student from a negative to a positive influence]," says Rick Smith, founder of [Conscious Teaching](#), who often presents the method with Dearborn. Smith says Two-by-Ten gives a disruptive student what he is seeking in the first place: a positive connection with an adult.

"Safety is a fundamental human need and if kids don't feel it, they're going to ask for it," he says. "Oddly, the way they sometimes ask for it is to act out." Although it may seem like they are trying to sabotage your classroom, a student is more likely communicating the message "Would you connect with me, so I can let down my guard?"

## Targeted Attention

Lisa Kitzmann, a 3rd grade teacher at Eldridge Elementary School in Hayward, Calif., used Two-by-Ten to address the outbursts that were occurring frequently in her classroom. When Eldridge gained a mix of new students because of local school closures, behavior issues in the Title I school escalated.

Although Kitzmann, who refers to herself as a "teddy bear teacher," already connects with students daily, she says the strategy "really helped me target the kids I was struggling with and give them more structured attention."



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Curiosity motivated Kitzmann to study the efficacy of Two-by-Ten for her master's thesis. Over the course of a year, she used the strategy on four students (three separate times) and teamed up with a teacher's aide to collect data based on daily observation checklists (which tracked disruptions such as talking with peers, interrupting the teacher, and not following directions) and the number of "red alerts" or behavior referrals sent home to parents.

Kitzmann ultimately found that the students she worked with were "less disruptive, changed their attitudes, and had a stronger drive to succeed in school" after exposure to the Two-by-Ten strategy. In addition, the class as a whole was "running more smoothly."

Still, it was a learning process for everyone, Kitzmann explains. Some of the students were more receptive to the conversations than others, but most tended to warm up to the attention by the second week.

## A Deeper Connection

Keeping the content of the conversations PG-rated and centered on the student's personal interests is essential to making the strategy work, Smith asserts. Teachers can use an interest inventory to ask questions or just "focus on whatever the kid is talking about to his friends or what he's wearing—his sneakers, backpack, anything at all," says Smith. "If he has a Packers jersey on, that's a sure clue."

The discussions, however, should extend beyond the typical "how are you today, nice to see you," says Kitzmann. Even talking about what the student shared in class or wrote about in an exercise does not have the same effect as when teachers probe more deeply. "The focus of Two-by-Ten is just getting to know the child outside of school," she says. "Find out what his favorite food is, what his favorite hobby is, how did his baseball game go, etc. If [your approach is] authentic, the child will know it."

When a student is especially "resistant and shutdown," Smith recommends striking up a conversation with one of the student's friends within earshot and eventually drawing that student in, even if it takes several days.

## Stealth Planning

Two-by-Ten is "one of the most powerful relationship-changing strategies I know," writes Allen Mendler in *When Teaching Gets Tough* (ASCD, 2012). Mendler suggests that, at least for the first few days, teachers build the time into their lesson plans when other students "are engaged in an assignment or project that requires less ... direct teaching."

Kitzmann initiated her conversations outside of class when she could more subtly approach a student. "I would do it walking out to recess, walking beside the student to music or PE, checking in on them at lunch, or walking out with them at the end of the day."

Smith advises, especially at the secondary level, that teachers learn the student's schedule and "position yourself in the hall [during passing periods] so [that] you happen to run into him 'by mistake.'" The planning may take a lot of foresight, he says, "but if that kid turns himself around in your class, it will have been worth it."


Allotting time for shorter conversations can also be beneficial as long as they occur *every day* (not counting weekends) because consistency is what "allows the walls to come down," Smith continues. Thus "half a minute a day for 10 days is better than one 20-minute conversation because [the student] needs that ongoing connection to relax."

## Where the Magic Happens

"Does Two-by-Ten solve everything? No," Kitzmann is the first to admit. Although the strategy is not a remedy for disruptive behavior, "in 10 days, you establish enough of an understanding that helps you relate to a child or get a relationship going."

By taking the time to ask the right questions, you learn a lot about the student and often begin to "see the child in a different light," Kitzmann elaborates. "In every experience, I have been surprised by what a student shared, or what they taught me, or how they inspired me."

"Once you make that extra step to connect with a kid, you get results," Kitzmann affirms. "And after the 10 days, the tendency is to keep the momentum going. It just continues; it's natural."

Adds Smith, "You have to remember that the teacher is often pretty guarded as well, initially, because the kid has been acting out. And then as you connect heart-to-heart, that's where the magic happens." 

*Could Two-by-Ten help you reach a challenging student? Learn similar strategies from nearly 90 sessions at the 2014 Conference on Educational Leadership in Orlando, Fl., October 31–November 2. Visit [www.ascd.org/CEL](http://www.ascd.org/CEL) to register.*

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